

SHIVVUS

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Many times people come to me and say, "Rabbi, I want to belong. I am new in town or I have been away from the Jewish community for a long time and I want to belong. Something is missing in my life. Nobody really cares whether I am living or dead. It really does not make any difference to anybody what I do." This feeling of rootlessness, of not belonging causes them great anguish and many times even boils over into rage. "Notice me, make me feel that I, too, am important", they seem to thunder at you.

How, though, does a person belong? How can a person feel that he is part of something? Many sociologists today tell us that one of the reasons for our evermounting crime waves is because people do not feel that they belong. They do not feel that they are part of society, therefore, they feel justified in taking anything they can, any way they can since there is no way they can be part of the total group. Paradoxically, the only way a person can feel that he belongs is by sensing and assuming limitations. ~~In order to belong to a sorority or fraternity, young people are willing to submit to all sorts of foolish procedures in order to belong to the group.~~ In other words, unless they are called upon to sacrifice for the group and to adopt certain rules and procedures, they do not feel that they belong. ~~In order to belong~~ a person must show that he has somehow earned the right to belong and that his contribution is needed by the group.

I am reminded of the pathetic story of a young man who wanted to join a fraternity. When he was blackballed for no good reason, he turned to the authorities. They determined that since this fraternity was a non-profit organization this group would have to accept him. He was very happy until he found out that by his going to the authorities not only he, but everyone else would also have to be accepted. He looked at the judge and said, "You mean everybody can be accepted? That's not the kind of fraternity I want to belong to." He wanted to belong but he did not want that if everybody else could automatically belong, too. He, of course, was wrong but it shows clearly that belonging means limitations, the limiting of others to belong and the limiting of your own behavior. In order to belong a person must accept upon himself the rules and obligations of the group, otherwise he will never be able to feel that he can belong. He must also feel personally responsible for all the

members of the group. The urge to belong, of course, can be misused and turned into a terrible vehicle of prejudice and hatred.

In Judaism everyone is free to belong, but you must assume your responsibilities as a Jew. Nobody is ever excluded. Anyone who assumes his responsibilities is immediately included, but you cannot feel you belong unless you assume responsibilities as a Jew, unless you feel responsibility for every other Jew and for the activities of your Congregation. It does no good in Judaism to say that you love your religion but then fail to assume responsibilities for your fellow Jews and fail to live a Jewish life-style. You cannot love Judaism and the Jewish people unless you love individual Jews, unless you relate to them and want to help them and want to be with them. People who come to me and say that they want to belong are very welcome, but unless they participate in the Synagogue's activities and unless they feel personally responsible for the Jewish destiny here in Houston and throughout the world, they will never feel that they belong.

In Judaism, we exclude no one. The reason many scholars say the English lost their empire was because no matter what the natives would do they would always be excluded. They were never made to feel that they could become a member of the elite. Certain clubs, beaches, etc. were restricted to English only. This type of exclusion enrages people and foments revolution. Judaism has always been a religious democracy. We have always said that a person would always be accepted and could rise to any position in the community if he assumed his responsibilities, lived a Jewish life, and learned about the Jewish tradition.

Pretty soon the holiday of Shavuot will be here. The Rabbis teach us that all the souls of all the Jewish throughout history were present at Mt. Sinai when the Ten Commandments and Torah was given. The Torah was and is accessible to everyone. The Ten Commandments were not given just to one or two people, but to the assembled Jewish people in front of Mt. Sinai. Everyone can belong. Everyone can make a contribution. We just have to assume our responsibilities. One of the most frustrating things in the world is to have someone always do things for you but never permit you to do anything for him. This eventually leads

to hatred. The person who receives and is not allowed to give anything in return soon becomes bitter. We, in America, sometimes wonder why all the people we have aided hate us. One of the reasons, I believe, is because we have not allowed them to give us anything. We have sent Peace Corps overseas to train other nations, but we have not indicated any way we could learn from them. We were the ones who could teach. We had nothing to learn from them. This attitude shows that the person receiving does not belong. This excludes him. This will, in the end, cause very generous, good people to be hated for no real good reason.

It is important that everyone in the community be allowed to make a contribution, to participate no matter what their level of ability, learning, means, or even commitment. If they want to participate and if they show that they want to participate by accepting certain obligations and responsibilities, then we must let them participate. Judaism is open to everyone. In the Torah portion, Kedoshim, we learn that when Moshe was to teach the principles of holiness he was to speak to all the people. "Speak unto all the Congregation of the Children of Israel, you shall be holy for I, the Lord Your G-d, am holy." Every Jew can be holy and every Jew can belong. He just has to want to.